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STUDIES

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EVALUATION OF CANCER CLUSTER REPORTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

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ABSTRACT

North Carolinians have long been concerned about the patterns of cancer occurrence in the state, especially those that signal a potential environmental risk. Being increasingly faced with the task of responding to citizen reports of apparent cancer clusters (defined as the occurrence of an increased rate of cancer in a small area or within a short period of time), the North Carolina Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources implemented a formal program for the evaluation of the cluster reports in 1982. Mounting volume of cancer cluster reports and limited resources resulted in the development of a revised protocol involving the Cancer Surveillance Section of the Division of Statistics and Information Services and use of more databased evaluation procedures.

This report provides an overview of the current procedures in use for evaluating cancer cluster reports in North Carolina and highlights a few of the most interesting cluster evaluations over the last sixteen months. Since September 1989, forty-nine reports of cancer clusters have been received from thirty-one counties. Twenty-seven of these reports have been evaluated and closed. Eleven cluster reports are currently in the process of active evaluation and another eleven are awaiting the start of evaluation activities. Of the closed reports, five indicated increased cancer occurrence with three of the five potentially providing additional clues to environmental risk factors.